The Mahabharata : Myths, Histories, Representations

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Statement of the Problem:

"The Mahabharata is not merely a magnificent epic, it is our national history. And it is not the history of an individual, but the spontaneously-created natural historical record of a nation." ["*Mahabharat matro mahakavya noy, eta amader jateeya itihas. Iha kono vyakti visheser itihas nohe, iha ekti jatir swarachita swabhavik itihas*."]

(Tagore: '*Bharatvarshe Itihaser Dhara'*, 1912)

The Mahabharata by Krishna Dwaipayana Vyasa, composed of 2,20,000 sixteen-syllabled lines, has been identified as the biggest of the world's epics, and, embedded in the Indian consciousness as "the national heroic past" (Bakhtin's term). Previously there was no written version of *The Mahabharata*— there might have been some events which were orally sung by the bards. The original story of *The Mahabharata* belonged to an earlier period than the time of its composition. According to Dr. Atul Sur, the oral version dated back to "five thousand years ago at the least" (Sur 1993: 9). In fact, the current form of the epic underwent many additions and interpolations during a vast span of time. According to many modern historians, the compilation of *The Mahabharata* extended over a few centuries, from 400 B.C.

to A.D. 400. Though this epic is basically a tale of conflict between two families of cousins named the Kauravas and the Pandavas, the descendants of Bharata, it virtually remains a veritable treasure house of India's philosophy, religion, political thoughts, social conventions and culture. But when we try to get a view of them in a single breath, instead of following a linear pattern, they appear to be jumbled up and disorderly. The reason is, as pointed out by Romila Thapar, telescoping of such a huge duration of time in a single epic, and also, interlinking a varied range of societies into a singular form.

Now, *The Mahabharata* provides us a complex and kaleidoscopic series of Myths that combine cohesion, difference, transition, genesis, renovation and adaptation in course of the exfoliation and establishment of historical enquiry. In the West, as Peter Heehs argues, "myth and history are often considered antithetical modes of explanation…" placing mythos in opposition to logos (Heehs 1994: 8). But in India, as the epics exemplify, "Myth, history, and the contemporary – all become part of the same chronological sequence; one is not distinguished from another; the passage from one to another, consequently, is entirely unproblematical," (Chatterjee 1992: 113). Here myths are considered to be what Malinowski calls "statements of reality, products of a living faith, intimately connecting word and deed" (Mitchell 1979: 129), and, also a repository of information regarding the regional-historico-geographical relationships between different population units and culture areas. Malinowski, in his 'Social Charter' theory, has proposed to judge myths in their present day social background, for this is an area of a kind of dialogism, which tries to figure out the specific register on which myths operate and demand accounting of the stories at the level of historical context and diffusion. My argument looks into such implications of crossroading the literary, the mythic and the historical.

Conceptual Framework:

The Mahabharata with its huge stature and great grandeur attracts the writers and the critics to use its unique mythical narratives either as the metaphoric expressions of their artistic responses and intense dilemmas concerning some haunting episodes of human civilization or as a valuable storehouse for reliable historical and anthropological database facilitating the project of tracing back a range of missing links of Indian past. My proposed thesis pronouncedly enquires about how certain contemporary dramatists draw on diverse mythic episodes of this 'grand narrative'—*The Mahabharata* — in their respective vocations conveying newer significations, and, thereby, creating a rich mythopoeic tradition.

Literature Review:

The Classical Period of Sanskrit literature (100 B.C.E.- 800 A.D) presented a rich vista of popular stage productions by three eminent dramatists who wrote their plays primarily stimulated by various episodes of *The Mahabharata*. Amongst them, Bhasa (Ist century B.C.E.), the founder of Sanskrit Classical drama, included different incidents of the epic in his six plays: *Madhyam Vyayoga, Pancharatram, Dutavakyam, Dutaghatotkacham, Karnabharam and Urubhangam*. In the second century A.D., Mahakavi Kalidasa also selected the narrative of Sakuntala of *The Mahabharata* as the theme of his famous play, *Abijnana Sakuntalam*. And then came Bhatta Narayana (8^{th} Century A.D.) who is well-known for his six-act drama, *Venisamhara*.

Like the Classical Period, the medieval era also witnessed the tradition of the plays based on the stories of *The Mahabharata*. Kulasekharavarman's, *Subhadradhananjaya*, (9^{th} century A.D.); Rajsekhara's *Balabharata* (10^{th} Century A.D); Kanchana Pandit's *Dhananjayavijaya Vyayoga* (12^{th} Century A.D); Vatsaraja's *Sugandhikaharana Vyayoga* (14^{th} Century A.D) are some illustrious specimens of the *'Mahabhavata*-plays.' But, the medieval

playwrights do not surpass their classical ancestors in the level of dramatic theme and practices.

Works based on *The Mahabharata* of the colonial period (19th Century A.D) are fused with the patriotic spirit. Michael Madhusudan Dutt's *Sermista : A Drama in Five Acts* (1859); Rabindranath Tagore's *Chitra : A Play in One Act* (1892; rpt. 1914); K.P. Khadilkar's *Kichaka Vadh* (1907); Pandit Narayan Prasad Betab's *Mahabharata* (1913) and Radheyshyam Kathavachak's *Veer Abhimanyu* (1916) and *Draupadi Swayamvara* (1935) symbolically illustrate the then British domination as well as India's struggle for autonomy and integrity.

After the Independence, the Indian dramatists, alongside the poets, and also the writers of narrative fiction exposed the age old history and culture of the country by depicting its myth and history in their works. Being in that process, they also responded to the crisis of the new born nation. The major issues reflected in their writings were the protests raised against illiteracy, corruption, unemployment, social inequality, poverty, communal disharmony, partition of the nation and several other questions haunting the post-independence Indian scenario. And often, the literature of this period did not remain confined to its national identity by giving allusion to the global threats like, nuclear warfare, the cold war and several such instances throughout the world where humanism was challenged by man's own inhuman activities.

A range of modern Indian plays originally written and performed in Indian language and later on translated into English adopted the above socio-cultural problems, by drawing on the master text— *The Mahabharata,* and thus created a novel dramatic 'tradition' that engaged epical myths for elucidating various climacterics of their own times. Some of such post-colonial post-modernist playwrights establishing this tradition are Dharamvir Bharati

(1926-1997), Adya Rangacharya (1904-1984), Buddhadev Bose (1908-1974), Bhisham Sahni (1915-2003), Girish Karnad (1938- -), K.N. Panikkar (1928- -), Ratan Thiyam (1946- -) and Saoli Mitra.

However, though *The Mahabharata* is an Indian epic its magnetic charm as a grand narrative continues to encourage foreign writers also. Sometimes it becomes an easy model for epitomizing orientalistic approach of the Europeans like that of Goethe or Monier Williams; but often it turns out to be the genuine source of inspiration for those writers who are yearning to address their existing socio-politico-cultural scenario, local or global in nature. Peter Brooks is one such dramatist and film-maker who put the epic in performance, engaging actors belonging to different nations, thereby creating a very powerful production which has a universal appeal combined with a mythic-symbolic significance.

Proposed Chapterization of the Thesis:

In my work, I have selected four performance-texts by various authors belonging to different ages of literary history. All of them have chosen some episodes related to the epical war from the master-text, *The Mahabharata* and then used them as a 'metalanguage', by putting the old signifiers into new systems of significations. They unveil the loop-holes that can be found in the epical versions of those narratives and then try to explore the inner significances of those episodes seen in the light of the contemporaneity of our modern world. My effort is to look into such pieces of re-mapping as well as the re-staging—keeping in mind the original accounts given by the epic.

The work is divided into two main sections, namely, 'Text' and 'Performance', focusing on the texts like *Andha Yug* by Dharamvir Bharati, *Chakravyuha* by Ratan Thiyam, *Timeless Tales* by Saoli Mitra and, *The Mahabharata* by Peter Brooks. All of these texts are

intended to be judged as a 'reader' at first and, then, as a 'viewer', for they all have transformed the 'epical text' into 'performance-texts'—and this plurality, I think, will be the channel through which we can search for the import of the ancient epic in today's world full of violence and hostilities. The work is roughly planned to have the following chapters, although the divisions are tentative at present.

Chapter-I: This introductory chapter intends to present elaborately the philosophical, sociological and historical significance of the mythic tales of *The Mahabharata* as investigated by a number of well-known litterateurs like Buddhadeva Bose and Protiva Bose, and, the renowned anthropologists like Irawati Karve. To elucidate Buddhadeva Bose's thoughtful observations on a range of mythical events and characters of the epic in his *The Book of Yudhisthir: a Study of the Mahabharat of Vyas* (1986) it is better to quote the writer himself: "my approach is literary; if 'literary' is too wide a term, it is poetic and, like poetry, dependent on mythology… I have in fact looked for essential meanings precisely in the mysteries of supra-real situations… I have tried to show the *Mahabharat* is no dim and petrified account of antiquity, but that it is very much present in the flow of the human life even now." (Bose 1986: xv). Then, there is Protiva Bose's intrepid and intriguing reading of the great epic in her *Mahabharater Maharanye* (1997) where she has tried to interpret the happenings, characters and relationships with fresh psychological and socio-historical perspectives. Karve offers an insightful and extensive study of the legends of *The Mahabharata* based on sociological, ethnographic and archaeological survey in her book named *Yuganta* (1991).

Chapter-II: Here I take the play, namely, *Andha Yug* by D. Bharati which deals with the modern day's relevance of the epical war by capturing the outcome of the Kurukshetra war. It focuses on the predicaments of the victims of the war and also on the after-war chaos affecting the lives of both the winner and loser. Ultimately, the play disapproves of war as a

means to bring any constructive results either in the society or in the existence any individual being, with the help of potent allusions to the destructive happenings of the two World Wars.

Chapter-III: This part aims to talk about R. Thiyam's *Chakravyuha* by delving into the author's insightful venture of drawing parallels between the power-politics of the epical war-time and that of the statutory apparatus of contemporary time. The dramatist here re-tells the episode of the brutal murder of the innocent adolescent Abhimanyu and it becomes a potent emblem to express the helplessness and exploitation of today's youth at the hands of the political gamblers. In a bigger spectrum this play turns into a symbolic representation of the power-division among the giant nations like the USA or Russia and the third world countries like ours or Iraq.

Chapter-IV: Here, I wish to deliberate on Peter Brook's adaptation of the whole epic. Brook along with Carriere, in a very novel manner, dramatise the entire epic and in course of doing that also make some alterations—especially, the numerous didactic portions and the sub-plots are completely omitted. These changes at times enlighten the epical motifs, but some of them often lead to distortions also. However, Brook as a veteran director, ultimately dares to represent the whole epic in a nine-hour theatrical production and this gives rise to mixed reactions from Indian as well as the foreign critics. Ultimately, this work, alluding back to the ancient war, reflects upon the on-going waves of violence spread throughout the world.

Chapter-V: This portion centres on S. Mitra's *Timeless Tales* which is again a re-telling of the entire *Mahabharata*, but its inimitability lies in its treatment from the perspectives of the numerous female personas of the epic, such as, Satyavati, Amba, Ambika, Ambalika, Gandhari, Kunti, Draupadi, Subhadra and Utatra. Written and performed in the traditional Kathakata style of rural Bengal, it has one woman as its storyteller who, very

innovatively, relates the epical events leading to the annihilation of an established civilization and imitates the gestures and emotions of various characters single-handedly with the aid of choric music.

Methodology: *The Mahabharata* is such an epic that inherently liberates the scope for the concept of plurality. It has multiple authors; its listeners/ readers often become its authors, too. And this amazing quality turns apposite when some of our post-modern dramatists use the epic's mythical reservoir in their works with allegorical import. Thus, the plays like *Andha Yug*, *Chakravyuha*, *Timeless Tales* and *The Mahabharata* (by Carriére and Brook) work as challenges to any kind of fixed meaning of the epical meta-narratives, and, at the same time, create a unique space where the rigid identities of the fact/ fiction, history/ story, past/ present or reader/ writer jostle and merge together. Intended to be written in the MLA format, my proposed thesis attempts to explore these points by implementing the thoughts like post-structuralism, post-modernism, feminism, reader-response theory, reception theory and theories on historiography. It wishes to analyse these 'cultural texts' in order to be 'compared, replicated, disproved and generalized' (Walliman 2011: 13) It also hopes to stress the interactions among past and present trends in literature thus finding answers to those glaring complexities of humanity. The thesis, then, in a kind of evaluative bent, wishes to move beyond mere factual analysis of reality by trying to make sense of the myriad political, social, cultural and historical elements involved into the human existence.

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